

# **ARGOS**

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN FILM  
YORK UNIVERSITY  
TORONTO, ONTARIO

June 2018

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## ABSTRACT

The name of my thesis film *Argos* is titled after the main character's dog in Homer's ancient Greek epic *The Odyssey*. The film does not take any structural story formats from the epic, as it engages with magic realism, neo-realism, and aspects of humour within film noir. *Argos* follows a self-sufficient Mother who wants to raise her daughter in a healthy, unobstructed environment – and thus transforms the father of her daughter into a dog to comply with this assessment of “family life”. The daughter enjoys the company of the dog so much that she goes out of her way to transform other fathers in her small town into dogs, re-inventing the sense of home with her town.

I chose to embellish the set-design during the transformation sequences in the film to draw the viewer into a world that was recognizable, yet also enjoyably fictional. The short format drew a lot of unique problems as I had written and shot many other scenes and attempted to integrate a slew of characters. The one-week shoot took place in Deseronto, an outlying community that is hugged by the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte. I had to reach out to both municipalities prior to production in order to access key locations as well as invite locals to audition and aid in the film in the best ways they could. This initial attempt at reaching out burgeoned a phenomenal working relationship with the Mohawk community, a key ingredient in the success of our production.

The key research questions that the thesis essay asks is the relationship and role of location in the narrative weave of the project, and if location can be garnered as a character within film. I wanted to decipher and recognize what elements about the geographic space

brought back memories, as well as note behind the scenes information that allowed for us to gain certain locations as well as engaging the intuitive nature of our shoot. The essay is broken down into location-scene-titles from the script that include the site and characters within that scene to help trigger various layers of production information. These sub-chapters begin with inspirational quotes that align either with the scene directly and/or the various thematic and filmic avenues the film broke off into.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte, specifically Chief R. Donald Maracle, Charles Maracle, Danny Maracle, Bev Hill LaRue, Balin Hill, Kelly McMurter and Joe Brant. I would also like to thank the Rooney Family for allowing our production the time and space to guide Hannah through our independent production shoot; Amy McDonald from the Deseronto Public Library; and Steve and Deb Simic who gave us access to our main set.

I would also like to thank John Greyson for talking me into applying to the York Film Program, as otherwise Argos would not have been made at this point in time. Thank you Philip Hoffman for coming on board at a later date and watching my rough cuts and giving me constructive feedback. Chelsea McMullan for reading my script prior to production, and Britt Irvin for working alongside me throughout this ambitious project.

Thank you: Lucas Treleaven and Sam Holling for being such a bad-ass duo; Talia Shipman for taking the plunge from artist to production designer; Steph George for creating fantastic looks for each character, Matt Beckett for recording all nonsense scripted and unscripted; Patrick LaMarre for cooking our crew epic feasts every lunch and dinner; Eshaan Gupta for working such long hours, John White for driving out and working the longest day of your acting career; Ishan Davé for coming out and committing yourself to the character of The Reporter; the four talented musicians that make up Mr. Joy; and Michelle Irving for working yet again on one of my art films; Kuowei Lee for the many updates and deadline reminders; and the York University equipment room staff Stephanie Adamson and Marcos Arriaga for putting up with my many various requests!

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	v
INTRODUCTION: LOCATION AS GENESIS FOR STORY .....	1
Chapter 1: EXT. TRAILER PARK: HOMEs .....	2
Chapter 2: EXT. GRASS VISTA: YOUTH .....	5
Chapter 3: EXT. TRAILER PARK, FIELD: TRISTAN .....	7
Chapter 4: INT. MOTEL, LOBBY: CLERK, THE REPORTER .....	9
Chapter 5: INT. TRAILER PARK: TRISTAN, MOM.....	13
Chapter 6: INT. TOWN HALL, TOWN: MOM, TRISTAN, THE REPORTER .....	16
Chapter 7: EXT. TOWN HALL, MOM, BECKY, THE REPORTER.....	19
Chapter 8: EXT. TOWN STREET ALLEY: 3 BULLIES, TRISTAN.....	20
Chapter 9: EXT. STREET, NEAR MOTEL: THE REPORTER, YOUTH .....	22
Chapter 10: EXT. PARK NEAR KENNEL: TRISTAN, MR. LEVI .....	23
Chapter 11: INT. TRAILER PARK, DINNER TIME: MOM.....	24
Chapter 12: EXT. TRAILER PARK, LAWN: MOM .....	25
Chapter 13: EXT. ABANDONED THEATRE: YOUTH .....	26
Chapter 14: EXT. KENNEL BUILDING, SIDE ENTRANCE: TRISTAN .....	27

Chapter 15: EXT. LEVI'S BACKYARD: TRISTAN, MR. LEVI, MRS. LEVI .....	28
Chapter 16: INT. LOCAL BAR: MOM, BECKY, MR. MURPHY .....	31
Chapter 17: EXT. KENNEL BUILDING, LAWN: THE REPORTER, MR. LEVI, TRISTAN.....	33
Chapter 18: INT. KENNEL BUILDING, MAIN SPACE: MR. LEVI, DOGS, TRISTAN.....	35
Chapter 19: EXT. / INT. KENNEL BUILDING, SIDE ENTRANCE / MAIN SPACE.....	37
Chapter 20: EXT. TRAILER PARK, LAWN: MOM, TRISTAN, PUG .....	38
RELATION OF ARGOS TO PREVIOUS WORK.....	41
CONCLUSION.....	43
 WORKS CITED .....	 46
FILMS CITED .....	48
FILMOGRAPHY .....	49

## INTRODUCTION: LOCATION AS GENESIS FOR STORY

*Can the dog  
repair the master,  
oh the dog  
does hope so! One  
thing about hell is  
the echo  
is fabulous.*

Anne Carson, *Float*

“There lay the hound Argos, full of vermin; yet even now, when he marked Odysseus standing near, he wagged his tail and dropped both his ears, but nearer to his master he had no longer strength to move. Then Odysseus looked aside and wiped away a tear.”

Homer, *The Odyssey*

Locations demarcate a sense of self to those that inhabit them. Within film, locations and sets can display unspeakable realities projected from the characters that frequent them, and are able to naturalistically convey character traits and mood to an audience. Either a character is an interpolation of themselves and the space, where their personal taste is congruent with their surroundings; or they are paired against the space, organized as combative and reactionary, which invites investigation and scrutiny. When we choose to watch a film, it is a cognitive acceptance to now be shown something between the very near or very far from our manifested lives. Stories may conform to a site or begin to be conceived whilst upon a site. Fictional universes are created and produced while the stories within them usually feel more relatable than those worlds. Films can take the alternate route too, where the space and location is relatable, perhaps situated within the present culture, while the narrative within it is completely unrelatable and surprising. This adaptability of space within a narrative, to be the relatable element or the uncommon element within a scene, arose during the investigation and pre-production while producing *Argos*.

## Chapter 1: EXT. TRAILER PARK: HOMEs

“In order to enable identification with the gaze of the camera and to equip the spectator with the power of the seemingly all-seeing and all-knowing voyeur, certain rules must be followed. On the screen we see a play of light and shadow. This spectacle of fluttering photons initially has *nothing* in common with the qualities of reality we recognize in the images. This is because film does not reproduce reality. Film reproduces *conditions of our perception of reality*.”

Peter Tscherkassky, *Film Unframed: A History of Austrian Avant-Garde Cinema*

Sound and image have a transformative relationship. Together, they can build a world that's as real as our very own. Separated, they divide and pluralize our senses into fragments and memories, drawing upon past remembrances, details one may not have completely acknowledged as well as newer combinations of atmosphere that feel altogether unique. During post-production on my first film *Dis-caract* (2011) I happened to come into contact with Michelle Irving, who was then beginning her sound-design career after producing and touring as a DJ. I culled together personal funds and was able to hire her to create an immersive soundscape within the interiors of my art-house project. Since then I have kept an acute ear pointed towards the dimensions and distinctness of sound, which together with the cinematography and image, can reveal a newfound perception of reality. Even though today's technological achievements are dramatically improving the tools used to capture images, sound devices and equipment for recording and mixing sound in the past decade have remained relatively standard. I argue that remarkable sound design layered atop a low-quality pixelated image can still result in a professional, remarkable sense of place, atmosphere and emotion. However, the same doesn't necessarily hold true in other direction, when a phenomenally crafted



image is paired with horrendous sound design. If the world isn't properly built through audio then the image can't follow suit.

We thought it would be possible to use the first scene of *Argos* to experiment with this sense of sonic encapsulation, as well as narrating a key component in the film for our audience. Because there is no expanded back-story as to why Mom transforms Tristan's father Sam into a dog, we wanted to build the world that inspired this first transformation solely through audio. Thus I chose to use the space within the intro title credits – while listing the director, cast and key crew – to embellish the tumultuous relationship between Mom and Sam through dialogue, and acknowledge that he is a notoriously absent father who isn't ever there for the family as well as neglecting his daughter. We built this narrative solely through sound design, integrating an ADR dialogue between Mom and Sam. He enters their trailer late at night, throws his boots off, talks verbosely about wanting to eat and then quickly gets told off by Mom who cites the reasons why he is such a bad father.

Through this technique, the audience enters the film through an isolated vantage point, forced to build the world they see not through image, but through the foley of the trailer and the dialogue and sound design. However, we finally pay our respects to the image after Mom prepares to transform Sam, with a slow dolly towards their trailer park home as smoke billows out of the slamming door and green flashes strike an exotic, supernatural tone. Key sound elements are heard in this transformation segment, such as the zipper – which is a part of the costume we see Tristan using later on Mr. Levi as well as the The Reporter.

Introducing the audience to this location at night was a decisive move that sets the tone for the rest of the film, hinting at the greater, darker regions of the narrative. It is an attempt to foreshadow the subtext of the film, for in the following scene we go directly to a breezy, sunny summer day as Tristan plays humorously with her new pet. Here I've attempted to mask the dark tendencies of the film through Tristan's light-hearted and straight forward interactions and demeanor.

We return to the trailer park three more times throughout the film: once inside the trailer during the day as we observe the first dialogue between Mom and Tristan, prior to them departing to a town hall meeting; the second time as Mom awaits Tristan's return home for dinner, plucking and placing a small flower beside her stagnant and steaming dinner plate, in a gesture of love and affection towards her daughter; and finally at the conclusion of the film where a setting sun illuminates their outdoor dinner together, while The Reporter, their most recently transformed victim, mulls over the ramifications of becoming a canine. Displaying their trailer park home during peak daylight hours helps to establish the environment as a safe-haven for this small-knit family. It is a sanctuary of sorts, a place of deep penetrating magic as well as emotional thirst and love. It is a home of open conversation and inspirational growth. Within this scene we see that within the home of our protagonists there is a rich and tactful commitment to self-fulfillment and savage revenge.

## Chapter 2: EXT. GRASS VISTA: YOUTH

“Grappling with crumbling futures that propel us backward onto an agonizing present, we may realize that the place we are falling toward is no longer grounded, nor is it stable. It promises no community, but a shifting formation.”

Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen*

From the expansive hilltop, we see a group of youth huddled together. Dawn spreads its rays upon them as we presume by their haggard appearance and weightless vibe that they’ve collectively witnessed the previous night’s sunset, having stayed up on an all-night bender. The youth are expectant, curious, zoned out, and comfortable. The three teens share a moral sensitivity and mutual pathos towards the daily drudgery grind of their unproductive days and lives. Perhaps it’s a Saturday or Sunday, or perhaps they are skipping school. Whatever day it is, these youth optimize the threshold of attitude that can be drawn from the burgeoning generation – an irksome twitch towards a desire for prosperity and pulling themselves up from the living conditions that they were raised in. Even though they banter about how to make money through unique and creative trades (such as making specific furniture for all the dog owner’s in town), there’s really no rush. As they continue to look out onto the expanse of horizon, one of them grabs a book she has with her and reads from it the Hito Steyerl quote above. The cover of the book however is a re-print of Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*.

Written for the first few minutes of the film, this scene later shifted to the tail end of *Argos*, becoming the second last scene which fades-in from a blackout set in the Kennel. This Grass Vista scene shows the only wide of the town, a field of view which gives us a fantastic perspective on the actual scale of the town – seeable in one vista, quaint and isolated, along the soothing Napanee river, the town could almost go unnoticed if one were passing by on a boat or

paddling in a canoe. This grass vista presents a lovely and dramatic objective glance on a town where many emotive tombs are kept quiet and vacant.

The Youth were originally conceived as encompassing a role similar to that of a Greek Chorus. I intended for their voices to be outside of the storyline, while adding to the towns sense of wonder, disparity, and other-worldliness. Within the final editing phase of the film I had to drastically edit out many other Youth scenes. Though they encompassed unique character aspects, and were well shot in unique locations, they took away from the driving force of the story which had to stay focused on Mom, Tristan and The Reporter.

Originally I wanted to write in a few key scenes that included an actual conversation between Tristan and the Youth that would have sealed their inclusion in her dark undertakings, as opposed to this glazed sense of awareness that we see during the Grass Vista scene. In the end, this scene added a good chronological shift of time to the conclusion of the film. It allowed the flow from the Kennel to step outside itself, and into another day. It plays out as a wonderful fresh breathe of air, as well as inciting a new uplifting mood represented and aided by a final stanza of the score which arrives just as the female Youth punches her friend on the shoulder. This final score begins in this scene and plays into the final scene as well as the ending credits.

### Chapter 3: EXT. TRAILER PARK, FIELD: TRISTAN

“Always beat the boys up,  
Grew up in a 5000 population town,  
Made my money by cutting grass,  
Got fired by fried chicken ass,  
All in a small town, Napanee.”

Avril Lavigne, *My World*

The scene is shot in the early morning. Glorious gold beams throw stark shadows on Tristan’s smiling, exuberant face as she plays with her newly transformed father, Sam. The grass is tall and we feel the inherent intimacy between dog and owner, human and pet...father and daughter. The scene was filmed beside the cabin where our crew was lodged during the one week shoot. The genesis of this location by the Napanee River becoming our main shooting location came about through seeking August cabin rentals outside of Toronto. I knew that I wanted to shoot in a location that inspired me, beyond the comforts that Toronto offered. This cabin was literally the cheapest option for its size. It was located on a peninsula that came into the upper Napanee River, with access via a single road, east enough out of Toronto for me to have never made the time to visit. After Google-mapping the surrounding area where the cabin was located, I saw two towns, Deseronto and Napanee. Napanee is home to Canadian young-rocker Avril Lavigne, and has a cute Ontario east-coast vibe about it with plenty of small shops, bakeries and clothing stores. From the outset I did not find this town attractive, as I sensed too many barriers along the way in attempting to shoot in a very low-budget/DIY fashion. Then I looked into Deseronto, which couldn’t be more different than Napanee in every way. I had a slew of massive, historic buildings sprinkled down it’s three-block main street, a humongous looking biker bar, and seemed primarily desolate. Zooming out on Google maps I noticed the perimeter of Deseronto was hugged by the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte. Their territory

reaches as far west as Shannonville, and included the peninsula where the cabin I had found was located. Excited about the outcomes available and the amount of unknowns the town of Deseronto presented, as well as yielding enough unique architectural landmarks to suffice for the main shooting location of *Argos*, I contacted Nancy Brant who owned the cabin and arranged for a visit to drop off half of the two-week rental price. This first visit out to the Napanee region to give my down-payment on the cabin was actually my first physical location scout, thus I went into this project with a lot depending on instinct and intuition.

The cabin backed onto a small inlet of water that flowed out to the Napanee. With a recent flood a few months earlier, all the surrounding grass was heavily swamped. At the furthest end of the peninsula, I found a small, beautifully located trailer park, with no one in attendance in their small cabin/lobby. After returning to Toronto and conversing with my producer/lead actor Britt Irvin, we decided to arrange a meeting with the Chief Mohawk of the Bay of Quinte. This future meeting turned into a fantastic encounter, blossoming into a plethora of contacts and connections, one being Kelly McMurter who owned the trailer park facilities and ended up giving us free-reign on the property (as well as acting as a background actor) as no one was utilizing the facilities due to the earlier flood.

## Chapter 4: INT. MOTEL, LOBBY: CLERK, THE REPORTER

“The sound that first breaks the near-silence is just as foreboding. Barton taps the bell to register his arrival, but instead of a short, quick ring, the sound of the bell’s decay continues well beyond a realistic time-span. It is, perhaps, for Barton the first diegetic sound that suggests something is awry. He is, however, undeterred.”

Randall Barnes, *Barton Fink: The Atmospheric Sounds of the Creative Mind*

When American cinema had moved past a fascination with one-road main streets and left Westerns in the (temporary) dust, cinema began to turn its lens towards *the motel*. The first constructed motel was unveiled in 1925, designed by architect Arthur Heinman and located in the droll town of San Luis Obispo (just off the highway where James Dean had his fatal car accident in ‘55). The third (and most revered) representation of a motel in cinema is seen in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960). As Philip French, the late film critic writer for the Observer notes, Hitchcock was “concentrated on the motel, conducting the audience around the set, contrasting the sinister gothic house on the hill with the unthreatening motel in the foreground. For him, the motel and the house were characters too.” (French, 2000). This cinematic conceit of equating two sets with as much narrative importance as two lead characters is revolutionary to the filmic format. Especially in regards to the genre of horror, which often creates sets that yield an individualistic presence through a cacophony of specialized sound design effects, this tactic introduces an objective sensibility to cinema’s signature storytelling techniques. Though the road movie genre shifts gears steadily away from Hitchcock’s popular hysteria while embracing the motel, the celebration of this one-level building-mass, often painted in irregular colours, dressed with shabby, juxtaposing drapes, and owned and operated by an eccentric and obtuse male, has occupied such a hard-edged aesthetic niche with audiences that it’s impossible to disavow it as a significantly American cultural icon.

Well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are still seeing a strong demand for this humble yet psychologically puzzling location. The motel can of course host an incredible cast of transitory characters. Due to its nature of being a place of permanent temporality for its residents, the site will always double as a fantastically ‘new’ space within the infrastructure of a film, whose viewers are able to visit the motel location again and again, staying and departing through the lens of the camera. Most recently in Sean Baker’s *The Florida Project* (2017), the conception of motels being temporary places of habitation was re-investigated and told from the perspectives of renegade children raised by their single-mothers within a string of dilapidated motels in Orlando, Florida. The setting couldn’t have been better, for the disarray provoked by this site contrasted remarkably with the prospect of joy and fun every time the camera showed us the highway turn off for Disneyland. The architectural of motels is often laid out in a communal panoptic strategy, creating a U shape of one or two storeys surrounding a parking lot. It addresses the nosiness of residential living by giving everyone a vantage of everyone else’s door, thus establishing a “safety zone” within an environment that houses so many strangers.

A recent documentary *Voyeur* (2017) follows Gay Talese (writer for the New York Times) as he prepares to complete a new article on Gerald Foos, a man whose voyeuristic fetish compelled him to purchase a rundown motel. By adapting the heating grates on the ceilings of each private room, Foos was able to spy on each of his customers from the attic. Unbeknownst to them, he hoped to observe each guests sexual antics (or lack thereof). The owner wrote all his observations into a journal, attempting to chart the grand spectacle of sexuality. The most interesting part of this documentary shows Mr. Foos greeting each customer from behind his



lobby desk as they check in, and thus performing a clandestine character study, trying to determine how well they may perform in the privacy of their own room.

In *Argos* we introduce The Reporter upon his arrival at a motel. He is the thread that navigates the potential uncovering of the Mom and Tristan's secret process. This introductory scene (over written within the script), combined with a couple of other scenes with the Motel Clerk, attempted to build an absurdist relational subplot. However, I ended up having to cut these scenes in order to stay focused on the main trajectory of the narrative. Upon first meeting the Motel Clerk, who rises ominously from behind the front desk, we sense that this is a character with much more depth than we end up finding out about. The idea to make the Motel Clerk rise from behind the lobby desk was a last-minute addition intended to pay homage to the scene in the Cohen Brothers film *Barton Fink* (1991), where Barton arrives at a massive LA hotel only to find it completely vacant. He then rings the deskbell, which rings for an ominous 35 seconds (extended in post-production), before Steve Buscemi, playing the clerk, arrives out of a trap-door from behind the front desk. As the quote above states, this event "suggests something is awry. [Barton] is, however, undeterred." The Motel Clerk is another staple of cinematic obscurity, who exists within his own universe, and it is here – within the motel – where that universe lands. Thus the Clerk is able to be as multi-faceted as he wants, because his story and psyche will always stay concealed behind the façade of his dutiful pose. The Clerk exists behind the lobby desk, resilient to all plot and narratives circling around him. Before our shoot day, I had checked with the owner of the Motel (who lived on the second floor and had to be buzzed down) about our shoot. All was fine, as he had offered us the actual narrow entryway/lobby to shoot in. Beside two gigantic fish tanks, the space was meek and uninspiring,

and the fish tanks weren't in a good position to be featured in the scene. On our first scout with the crew we decided we would instead shoot in the now-vacant diner adjacent to the motel lobby, within the same building. After a few years of serving breakfast, there wasn't enough demand any more, and the owner had opted to not put the effort and time into flipping eggs every weekend. We dressed the empty pay-counter like a genuine entrance lobby. There was substantial light, as well as space to shoot our introduction scene. The Motel Clerk was cast locally from neighboring Kingston. He showed up to our audition day with another scene memorized, but when we realized that he had the obscurity desired for the Clerk, we crossed off that role. Three other scenes were shot with the Clerk and The Reporter, and then another single scene was shot with the Clerk on a private phone call to an unknown person. During the editing phase his character, though ideal and eccentric, referred allotted to too much content that wasn't discussed or shown anywhere else in the film. He was an intriguing introductory element, but adding more of his presence would distract viewers from our story. Within the short film format, we weren't able to answer the questions that he started to generate with his vacant, hostile, yet superior stare.

## Chapter 5: INT. TRAILER PARK: TRISTAN, MOM

“Placement is one of the primary elements in creating an engaging overall display. In contrast to the word’s static sound, placement is all about dynamism. It has the capacity to create new meanings and to challenge longstanding ones by orchestrating a visual experience. The trick is not to over-determine placement and allow multiple meanings and interpretations of a particular display.”

Jens Hoffmann, (*Curating*) from A to Z

Finally we can shift our eyes to humble arrangement of interior décor that introduces us to the films feminine solidarity of mother and daughter. We see the pale blue bed sheets hung as window curtains, pastel coloured dish plates, framed butterfly wings, and fuzzy bench blankets that all create a calm, serene, and sensual arrangement. Within this canopy of bliss, we also pan past a jar filled with a presumably dead tarantula; then we notice that the childish drawings are of a sinister-looking spider upon its web. This makes us question: how can such a warm and cuddly setting yield something so estranged? Mom mentions her enjoyment of Tristan’s transformation, and Tristan smiles, happy to be in the cocoon of her Mother’s love, alongside their now extremely loyal Dad.

There is a definite transformation from the night exterior of their trailer-park home in the opening shot to this mid-day sun-filled interior scene. We guess this is the same home we heard The Mom speaking within, but the contrast of colour, light and energies is profound. From the opening shot we see the exterior shell of the trailer as a dark enigma brooding with magic and surrealism. The camera never allows us to enter, but stays set back like a voyeur upon the scene, or a deer standing stalk still between trees, observing something supernatural. The transformation of this space into the warm, comforting light-filled interior that we now see is a

seismic shift of energies and emotions, assembling the place as the shared base of our main two characters. These differences can also be represented as a metaphor for the feminine and masculine character traits represented within the film. The exterior evokes the male's dark, untrustworthy and shifty self, while the interior refreshes us with the females sense of openness, love, and commitment. As the Mother and daughter exit their home, we note that the door was open the whole time – there's only a door-width beaded curtain to stop any potential negative energy flow.

This interior trailer (across the lawn from the one used as the exterior) took almost the entire week to dress, and the scene nearly got cut from the film shoot due to time restrictions, but it thankfully saved and became our last shooting location of the week. At this point, the actresses were well tuned to each others sensibilities, and in the scene, I can read their comfort with each other, as well as with the crew and camera, between the lines. I was very pleased with the set-dressing in this scene, and it was one of the main locations where the objects rented from an Art Department store in Toronto were used to their full advantage. The space feels like a fun, energetic, and safe universe. It is a place I wish we were able to revisit many more times in the film. The role of the Production Designer on a small budget/small crew film is extremely important and often comes down to many nit-picky specifics, as they also have to juggle the role of Art Director and Set Dresser. Due to shooting in August, (an extremely busy time within the film industry), I couldn't find any Art Department crew who I'd worked with in the past who could participate in the shoot. Finally, I proposed the idea to my friend Talia, who primarily practices in photography and sculpture, to take on the role as Production Designer. Knowing in

advance that she identifies as an artist allowed me to have tremendous faith in her decisions and overall aesthetic while we were in production.

## Chapter 6: INT. TOWN HALL, TOWN: MOM, TRISTAN, THE REPORTER

“In our practice, the curator has to bridge gaps and build bridges between artistic, publics, institutions, and other types of communities. The crux of this work is building temporary communities, by connecting different people and practices, and creating the conditions for triggering sparks between them. To put it simply, curating is being involved in the creation, production, realization and promotion of ephemeral situations.”

Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Participation Lasts Forever, Bridging*

Originally, the town-meeting scene was written into the film as being held in the Deseronto Library. During our location scout, the Library offered a unique, centrifugal interior with diagonally-placed book shelves which created a dramatic central core. There were colourful murals on the background wall as well as colourful posters and paraphernalia throughout the space. However, as it got closer and closer to shoot-day, I was getting distressed at how much Art Direction would have to go into neutralizing this interior, as it was a unanimous decision that the interior was too loud. On a final visit to the location, we discovered that the staff had started to change the orientation of the bookshelves into a grid-like structure, taking away the centralized core. This sudden shift in space made me realize that I was attempting to take all the great qualities out of the Library, in order to stage it as a dull interior. Confronted with the reality that we were attempting to alter this space too drastically within our timespan, I went half a block down the Main Street in Deseronto and walked into the Legion. We were shown a space above the pool tables and bar, which was often used as an event space, and it was perfect. With minimal decoration and a neutralized grey tone and blue accents, the Deseronto Royal Canadian Legion Branch 280 would be the new *Argos* Town Hall.

Legions were established in Canada to establish a home-base community for veterans of the two world wars. Very often, Legions may be the only bar that's open at 12pm within the town you may be driving through, and thus have established themselves as sterile watering holes for elderly veterans. On our shoot day, I was to meet the general events manager at 8am for the keys. Upon arriving at the front entrance, I noticed a truck with a large trailer full of cheap interior siding sitting right in front. I parked, sped over to the entrance, and found that the manager had double-booked our shoot day with a local contractor, who was ripping out the front entrance from the upstairs event space (which opened onto the street). After a few moments of hectic conversations, we confirmed that the contractors will stop work at 12pm, allowing us to shoot our interior scenes. However, we would thus not be able to shoot any entrance shots.

The town meeting is a significant moment in the film when the general character of the town is represented. We see various towns-folk passively listening to a Town Leader who is addressing the issue of all the missing fathers within the town. The towns-folk murmur and talk together and as the speech continues, the Mom and Tristan arrive, causing a small commotion upon entering. All the eyes in the room turn to watch them arrive and sit down. The Town Leader mentions that Sam is now missing, just as The Reporter enters the town hall with the flyer from the Motel in his hand. Acting clumsy and unaware, he plops himself down and takes his sunglasses off. There is a genuine ruckus that begins and his true sense of being an outsider is exhibited. The aspect of the outsider, with the actor of The Reporter being the most notable person of colour within the film, wasn't our initial reading while casting his role, as the actor is a close friend and I saw Ishan as naturally fitting the role through his general demeanor. While on set for this scene Ishan talked to me about the subtle racism that occurs between his character

and the town. The town hall leader instantly wants him sent out – and though the scene was scripted to focus on his identity as a Reporter, it is both the bi-product of his race and his character's role that makes this scene more poignant. Ishan's character symbolizes the conundrum of the outsider, who is both a part and far from becoming a part of society for more reasons than just their job title.

What this scene displays is the symbolic culmination of our small production setting up shop within the borders of both the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte, as well as the Deseronto municipality. Background actors throughout the town meeting scene are individuals who helped us in more ways than one, who went above and beyond their own call of duty to truly demonstrate a sense of commitment and passion to the project. This scene extends beyond the fictional community represented to document a focused, excited, and energized group of individuals who believed in our dedication enough to lend us a hand in whatever way they could. In return we respected their cultural anonymity and acknowledge the fine line our film had to tread from seeming like a commentary upon a culture as well as an act of appropriation.



## **Chapter 7: EXT. TOWN HALL, MOM, BECKY, THE REPORTER**

Almost as important as the interior town hall meeting for showing and displaying the character of the town, this exterior scene allows for a bustling scope of the townspeople milling about prior to going back to their homes or to work. There is skepticism within the townspeople as they shoot and dart glances around those standing outside. Amongst this group is The Reporter, who previously was aggressively ushered out of the townhall meeting due to his rude entrance and demeanor. Though the scene is used as a catalyst to show how the town wants to stay private and isolated from the general public, he is attempting to write a story about the missing Fathers within the town, and is eagerly looking for interviewees within the group mingling outside the town hall. This location was the actual Town Hall office in Deseronto, and they were very accommodating allowing us to art direct the front door and film for an hour outside.

## Chapter 8: EXT. TOWN STREET ALLEY: 3 BULLIES, TRISTAN

**Second Witch:** I'll give thee a wind.

**First Witch:** Th'art kind.

**Third Witch:** And I another.

**First Witch:** I myself have all the other,  
And the very ports they blow;  
All the quarters that they know  
I' th' shipman's card.  
I'll drain him dry as hay.  
Sleep shall neither night nor day  
Hang upon his penthouse lid.  
He shall live a man forbid.  
Weary sev'nights, nine times nine,  
Shall he dwindle, peak, and pine.  
Though his bark cannot be lost,  
Yet it shall be tempest-tossed.  
Look what I have.

**Second Witch:** Show me, show me.

**First Witch:** Here I have a pilot's thumb,  
Wracked as homeward he did come.

William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

It was paramount to situate Tristan within her age bracket somewhere in the film. We wanted to have a scene where it became obvious that the town was gossiping about Tristan and her Mom, and thus was born a scene that included a young gang of girls that could corner Tristan and confront her outright about her missing Father. This scene worked itself neatly into the script and occurs after the town meeting is held. It engages a sense of tension, and steps out of the conversational tone the film has. Locating itself in between two historic buildings, this “alley way” has a glorious view all the way down to the Napanee River. The girls, jealous of Tristan’s sense of independence as well as the extra attention she’s receiving from the Town Leader, lean against the walls whispering and giggling before Tristan begins to cross their paths. I didn’t want this to seem like a dead-end alley way, the kind that is referenced and utilized in

drug-bust films or cops and robbers scenes. I wanted it to have an exit and flow of traffic from both directions. The axis of this scene (from the main street and down into the alley) forms a T, and Tristan end up returning to the same pathway she was previously on, which allows us to see that she is continuing on her mission, and nothing is going to get in her way. There is not enough pressure in this scene to assume that the girls are going to hurt Tristan, but the arrival of an elder (who was also just at the town meeting) from the bottom of the T-axis forces the girls to back off from their goading and recalibrate. It also allows for Tristan to make her escape, pushing through the crowd to continue on her mission. There isn't any reference to these girls again in the film, and the main intention was to show that this town is aware of all the things that are going on. Every person encounters another person inherently "knows". This sense of knowing is inherent in small-town dynamics, so when Tristan and her mothers mystical activities increase, we wonder what exactly that town does know, and if they are possibly in on it too. The girls we cast for this bullying scene all auditioned to play the lead role of Tristan during our auditions held at the Deseronto Library. Each girl was unique, and could possibly have done a great job, but Hannah Rooney (who we cast to play Tristan) arrived with a guardian and her schedule allotted for her to easily participate in our intense shoot week.

## Chapter 9: EXT. STREET, NEAR MOTEL: THE REPORTER, YOUTH

*“A hotel is a society in miniature; a house is a symbol of family and continuity; the motel has become a metaphor for angst and alienation.”*

Philip French, *This looks a nice place to stop...*

When visiting a small town – where everyone knows everyone’s business – locals are often ready to lock-eyes and face-off with you, To them you are a stranger whereas to you they are most definitely intimidating! As a tourist or visitor to a town, depending on how small and secluded that town may be, there is often that introductory stage of attempting to bridge communication and build trust – for you are a stranger to them, someone completely unknown, with no references or back story. Bringing a new and uninvited energy to any environment can be startling, and that tension has the potential to grow when entering places where every face knows every other face. These are some of the initial barriers we had to navigate while producing our film within this context. Not only did it mean we had to go out of our way to introduce ourselves and constantly adjust our schedule, but it also meant we had to genuinely build a sense of trust with the two communities: one being the Deseronto city, and secondly the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte.

## Chapter 10: EXT. PARK NEAR KENNEL: TRISTAN, MR. LEVI

"He no longer dreamed of storms, nor of women, nor of great occurrences, nor of great fish, nor fights, nor contests of strength, nor of his wife. He only dreamed of places now and of the lions on the beach."

Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and The Sea*

Located at the water's edge of Deseronto, Mr. Levi is introduced after a morning of fishing by himself on the Napanee River. He seems elated, soaking in the atmosphere as he packs his truck when Tristan approaches him. This scene is crucial to establishing a sense of solipsistic energy in Mr. Levi – who represents the average Dad, yearning for greater freedom in his life. He sees his family as an obstacle between him and the sea, which represents this dream of freedom. Within the film's narrative, Tristan lays the groundwork for casting her initial spell on Mr. Levi in this scene, convincing him to come by her Kennel and purchase a dog for his daughter. Within these dialogues, Tristan casually states: "[dogs] are the most loving, loyal things ever! And whenever you decide to leave, she'll have him." Shocked at the bluntness of Tristan's comment, and caught off guard, Mr. Levi spends a moment trying to process her comment. A last note about this location: in the background behind Mr. Levi's right shoulder is the Waterside Market that we used for both the exterior and the interior for the Kennel location. It is a small nod to the proximity of all these locations within the town, and though I don't expect first time viewers to take note of this in the background, it subconsciously fills in the gaps for the fictional world of this small town.

## **Chapter 11: INT. TRAILER PARK, DINNER TIME: MOM**

This scene allows for Mom to show some tender love and care towards her daughter, as she prepares a dinner for her and attempts to yell for her from their trailer park front stoop, hoping to see if she is in earshot and able to come in to eat before she heads off to work. It's a subtly affectionate moment, and is the rare scene where we see Mom is alone, not surrounded by townsfolk, friends or Tristan. We attempted to shoot this scene at golden hour, as the sun was setting, though the actual sunset was behind the trailer and we missed the precise moment by 30 minutes. Thus, we had to add a fill-light to aid in replicating this specific moment. The small gesture of Mom picking out a flower and talking to herself out loud saying, "Just remember to be careful," demonstrates that for this family unit where surreal and magical gestures are occurring, there are risks of unforeseen danger, something Mom is most assuredly aware of.

## **Chapter 12: EXT. TRAILER PARK, LAWN: MOM**

This scene, cut from the film, showed Mom leaving the porch and running towards a field, then transforming into a bird in order to fly to her work and get there on time. This idea seemed appropriate in pre-production, as it allowed for another beat of transformation to occur in the film. In hindsight, the piece was ill fated: I went through two or three separate VFX artists who each respectively signed on (rendering a bird that fly's away into the sky and then off camera) and then stopped answering calls. After the third VFX artist fell through, I showed the cut to one of my advisors and was told outright that that scene wasn't needed, and that it created a distraction rather than an aid in regards to the metaphysical realm of transformation that I was exploring.

## **Chapter 13: EXT. ABANDONED THEATRE: YOUTH**

A considerable number of scenes starring the Youth had to be cut, including this one which introduced us to their private hang-out inside a derelict theatre from the 1920's. Inside this space, they talked about other supernatural aspects of the town, and poked fun at different levels of fear. Prior to cutting this scene from the film, the introductory shot of the Youth sneaking into this hangout location was ultimately the widest shot of the film. It included the entire width of Deseronto's Naylor Theatre, originally designed and built in 1901. The building supposedly closed in the 1920's and reopened as a movie theatre in the 1940's, finally closing again in 1961, and it has yet to be cleaned and/or renovated. I wasn't able to find out when all the demolition occurred within the interior of the space, as it seems the foundation had been excavated, but it has been left as an empty, rocky pit when we arrived there last summer. Along with the flea market building, Naylor Theatre played an important role in widening my breadth of communication within Deseronto, as a meeting with the municipality was arranged to gain access into this space. It was actually due to this landmark building, which I found on Google maps, that made me plan a scouting trip to the town in July. Rolling with my intuition, I also looked up cabins in the surrounding area and finally arrived at Deseronto to check on all of these previously researched locations as well as give my deposit to the owner of the cabin where all the crew would be staying.



## **Chapter 14: EXT. KENNEL BUILDING, SIDE ENTRANCE: TRISTAN**

It was hard to determine which constituted better luck: finding the resources of the Waterside Market & Storage to house the Kennel set as well as all the exterior locations representing the Kennel, or the trailer parks at Bert's Campground. These two locations made it feasible for us to both shoot at unique times as well as dress the sets to a standard we idealized. The exterior of the kennel building was what first struck me on my earliest location scout. Driving around the massive building, the backside shared a huge lawn which touched the Napanee River. This location became a 360 degree filming utopia, with its exteriors working as true entry points and its door access working ideally for the kennel and the initial hallway scene (rarely is the exterior of a set capable of being utilized as its true exterior, and vice-versa for interiors).

## **Chapter 15: EXT. LEVI'S BACKYARD: TRISTAN, MR. LEVI, MRS. LEVI**

Aside from Tristan and her Mom, Mr. Levi is the only person in the town who we grow to know. We meet him while he's fishing alone, reflecting on his good friend/fishing partner who happens to be Tristan's Dad. It is obvious that Mr. Levi enjoys his alone time with his pals, and mentions he's been out on the lake all alone all morning. This is a character who prefers the uncomplicated, hassle-free life of a single male, without the stress or responsibility of raising and looking after a family. He treads lightly while talking about her missing father, making sure to not get into too much detail, and quickly diverts the conversation towards the dog Tristan is holding, as he's heard about her Mom's breeding business. Tristan is taking the business over, and invites him to stop by their Kennel. He seems shocked at the girl's business prowess, but accepts the offer. Later in the film, we get to see Mr. Levi in his fatherly mode of life. Brandishing a red-checkered apron and spatula, Mr. Levi casually smokes while flipping hot-dogs on a barbeque. Within this scene and location, we see the general energy of a normalized family, preparing for dinner in their spacious backyard. His daughter plays on the grass while his wife sets the table. Noticing Tristan standing at the fence, Mr. Levi's wife calls out to her, inviting her in to eat. Her motherly instincts want to make sure that Tristan is ok and doesn't need anything, while Mr. Levi walks over aware that her appearance has to do with the deal they are making regarding the purchase of a puppy.

The town of Deseronto only has a few main streets – however, after driving up and down them numerous times we still couldn't find the ideal backyard that received good evening light, was large and also felt like a family lived there. To our surprise, located directly off the main strip, there turned out to be the ideal backyard. With a spiked steel fence that added a

unique edge to the summer-time feel, and already housing lawn chairs and a backyard table, this location proved to work perfectly for the happily eerie mood we were attempting to replicate. Another advantage of this location was the unique sense of depth created by a towering presence of the Canada Post building, which was on the main street corner. While standing just outside the fence where Tristan would be entering from and talking to Mr. Levi, you could see the entire backyard as well as this imposing gothic building looming overhead.

There are three moments in the film where we see Tristan or her Mother cast a spell on someone, and one of the main ones occurs during the backyard scene, as Tristan repeats the special line “It’s a lifelong bond that will never be severed” to Mr. Levi. This line is also repeated to The Reporter at the end of the film prior to his transformation, and he ends up repeating it while the transformation costume is already on him. Mr. Levi falls for the spell, and ever so naturally tells his wife that he must get the dog for their daughter, as it’s “a life long bond that will never be severed.” The intrinsic joke here is that once a father is transformed into a dog, they become the most loyal support system of the family, never leaving the family’s side, while always staying true and faithful. The backyard is a psychological barrier between what could be and what is, between a destiny and a future. Through Tristan’s upbringing, she has been taught that it’s “best” to merely change the physiological state of her other guardian, in the hopes of keeping him around, thus adding his loyal companionship to the family unit. While colour-grading this scene in post-production, we decided to mask out the sky and include a darker, more brooding tone. In the end the scene feels like something out of a Tim Burton movie, with the estranged sense of depth and foreground-to-background content. It ended up

being one of my favourite frames from the film, giving a wonderful undertone of eeriness to the entire mood.

## Chapter 16: INT. LOCAL BAR: MOM, BECKY, MR. MURPHY

“The first four humans, the first four earthly beings who were truly articulate when they moved their feet and hands, their faces and mouths, and who could speak the very language of the gods, could also see everything under the sky and on the earth. All they had to do was look around from the spot where they were, all the way to the limits of space and the limits of time.”

Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh: Introduction*

The large sign teetering upon a thick piece of steel with moveable black Helvetica font said “FRI DJ BOB, SAT KARAOKE WITH LARRISSA”. The location was the Dockside Tavern, a huge concrete-brick building with a double door entrance further up the main drag of Deseronto. From the exterior the space seemed massive, and sure, enough upon entering during my first location scout, it proved to be as large on the inside as it seemed on the outside. Not only was this location dated in a unique way, with fantastic relics and paraphernalia littered throughout, but the people hanging around inside were exact embodiments of what the space called for.

It’s hard to not be a voyeur in these scenarios and comment on how everything fits so perfectly with everything else, aside from the concept of the metropolitan city where various cultures and ethnicities fuse together to live in chaotic harmony.

The scene ends with the another example of a ‘magic spell’ that Mom puts on Mr. Murphy, who makes a rude joke about Mom and her friend Becky, who is discussing the current disparity of her relationship with her partner. Mom grabs Mr. Murphy a new beer and *magically* puts some worms inside the bottle before cracking it open for him. He takes a grimy gulp and

then spits them out, horrified. This is a fun example of Mom's use of magic to get even with the rude local drinker.

## Chapter 17: EXT. KENNEL BUILDING, LAWN: THE REPORTER, MR. LEVI, TRISTAN

“This is not a matter of externals, the forms can of course, if desired, be just as strictly observed by night as by day. So it is not that, on the other hand the official power of judgment suffers at night. One tends involuntarily to judge things from a more private point of view at night...”

Franz Kafka, *The Castle*

Attempting to create a specifically “spoofy” moment during this night scene, The Reporter walks out from a tangle of trees, having been looking *everywhere* for the culprit who may be abducting all of the fathers in the town. With no luck in sight and his spirits at an all-time low, he is stalled. However, conveniently over his shoulder, Tristan is simultaneously luring Mr. Levi into the Kennel. The Reporter acts in a traditional slap-stick manner, rushing forwards with a goofy tree branch to hide behind. After Tristan opens the door and lets Mr. Levi step inside the hallway of the Kennel, she briefly looks over her shoulder, making eye contact from afar with The Reporter who has observed their interaction. As Tristan vanishes behind the door with Mr. Levi, The Reporter squirms from his current position and runs alongside the Kennel building, hoping to find another access point inside.

The main location of the Kennel was one of the larger, vacant-looking buildings I had seen while conducting my earliest Google-walks of Deseronto, prior to visiting. On Google, the exterior advertised an out-of-service flea market, and the lot was for sale. Upon arriving in Deseronto on a Saturday for my first location scout, I was excited to see that there was a small collection of cars unloading used merchandise in the parking lot. After asking enough people who was in charge of this large building I eventually got the name of the owner, whose wife was

casually smoking outside with the rest of the ladies who sold antiques and other paraphernalia. They smoked cigarette after cigarette, awaiting their 10AM opening. It was a slow crawl of people that showed up, but I was able to get a look at an interior space between the large first room, which was currently used as the main flea market, and a back hallway space where permanent storage units were built with new grated-steel doors. This space had a collection of temporary walls and ancient-looking tools lying around. The owners wife said I could come back another day to meet her husband, and discuss a possible rental. This ended up being the only location we had to spend any money on, as I offered a nominal rental fee for the use of the middle room between the storage facility and the antique warehouse.



## Chapter 18: INT. KENNEL BUILDING, MAIN SPACE: MR. LEVI, DOGS, TRISTAN

“At an oil painting Phil Resch halted, gazed intently. The painting showed a hairless, oppressed creature with a head like an inverted pear, its hands clapped in horror to its ears, its mouth open in a vast, soundless scream. Twisted ripples of the creature’s torment, echoes of its cry, flooded out into the air surrounding it; the man or woman, whichever it was, had become contained by its own howl. It had covered its ears against its own sound. The creature stood on a bridge and no one else was present; the creature screamed in isolation cut off by – or despite – its outcry... “I think,” Phil Resch said, “that this is how an andy must feel.””

Philip K Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*

After Mr. Levi loses sight of Tristan within the storage unit hallway, he stumbles into his destiny...the main space of the Kennel, which is constructed as a surreal yet tangible location where animal-cages are littered throughout with various objects, utensils, and other paraphernalia. This location becomes a space of psychic possibility and transformational potential. Humans in animal masks crawl towards Mr. Levi as he attempts to take-in his surroundings. They sniff and bark at him – they are perhaps in-between transformations or just eager participants and friends of Tristan (this detail is never examined). Upon Tristan’s arrival into the space her assistants back off and make room for her to place the transformation mask upon Mr. Levi’s head. He is then brought to the transformation and undergoes the final stages of the process. The chair that was used for this scene was a custom-made prop by a local Mohawk named Balin Hill. After hearing about his metal and welding practice by the Mohawk of the Bay of Qunite Chief’s brother, I was brought there to meet with him. After looking around his work shed, I was inspired by all of the Spider Man designs he was making – such as various metal-welded webs and graphics. Not initially seeing the direct citation of the Indigenous dream catcher reference that this design motif may or may not have been inspired from, I proposed he

help create a very specific and important prop for us – the transformation chair – and told him he could utilize the same technique of the Spiderman web if that made the process any easier.

Intrigued by the entire film production aspect, Balin ended up delivering a gorgeous chair with a blue upholstered seat. The chair was absolutely spellbinding, and worked phenomenally in the film. We later added a children's drawing of a spider inside Mom's trailer to create a visual link to the chair and their secret practice the Mother and daughter share. Balin was credited with Prop Master for our film.

This design motif of the chair is the only circumstance where I permitted the inclusion of artwork from an aboriginal local. I believed that the piece stood far enough away from the traditional imagistic identities that depict the stories of the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte. As I did not have an aboriginal individual on the production team, I saw any larger gesture of inclusion as an example of appropriation, and though the Mohawks were ever-so inclusive in their attempt to aid our production, it still would have felt utterly dishonest to include aspects and references to a culture which I was not raised within and which wasn't proportionally represented on the creative team.

## **Chapter 19: EXT. / INT. KENNEL BUILDING, SIDE ENTRANCE / MAIN SPACE**

“A building is not an end in itself; it frames, articulates, structures, gives significance, relates, separates and unites, facilitates and prohibits. Consequently, basic architectural experiences have a verb form rather than being nouns. Authentic architectural experiences consist then, for instance, of approaching or confronting a building, rather than the formal apprehension of a facade; of the act of entering, and not simply the visual design of the door; of looking in or out through a window, rather than the window itself as a material object...”

Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of The Skin: Architecture and the Senses*

This scene allows the viewer to transition between the exterior and the interior spaces of the Kennel in one single take – an interior location which allows for the supernatural side of the film to be fully represented. At the top of the scene we wait outside the side door entrance while Tristan beckons The Reporter. He runs up, and the door is swung open to reveal the inside as a beam of green light blasts at him. The unique element of this scene is the transition from the ubiquitous exterior façade of the Kennel building to the interior’s unique and original assemblage of artifacts, junk and debris, as well as the sacred transformation chair centred within the space. This is The Reporter’s first visit to the interior Kennel, as Tristan doesn’t see any way out of tricking him again. This exterior/interior transition is a solid metaphorical ethos for the whole film, presenting to the viewer the idea that one may observe about someone on an artificial, surface level is not necessarily at all similar to what is subtly brewing inside that character.

## Chapter 20: EXT. TRAILER PARK, LAWN: MOM, TRISTAN, PUG

“Q: Why do you use only natural settings?

A: Because they stimulate me more. It is the same as it might be with a painter to whom someone said, “Here is a wall which is to be covered with frescoes, so many yards long and so many yards high.” These are the kinds of limitations which aid rather than fetter the imagination.”

*An interview with Antonioni Michelangelo*

We were elated when local Mohawk Kelly McMurter allowed us to shoot on her and her brother’s property, where they run trailer rental and campground services. Their location was an ideal setting for the home of Mom and Tristan, which we were able to shoot there at any time during the week. Working with naturalistic settings, which already yield a sense of history and inherent personal narrative, aids ten-fold to the capacity for the production design to be that much more believable, realistic and immersive. Seeing the trailer park the stark night, mid-day, and now here before sunset expresses a well-rounded sensibility to the passage of time. This scene included Mom mixing a large pot or stew for dinner to feed her daughter, their dog and now the newly transformed Reporter. It is a scene that came to me early on as being a necessity within the entire script, adding a light-hearted vitality to the tone of Tristan and her Mom’s midnight workings in the Kennel. Adding the voice over of The Reporter within the final frames of this scene presents a large problem within the narrative veil, as it assumes that the main subject of the film, from whom the vantage of the film is based from, is indeed The Reporter. Why this presents a problem is that in hindsight I feel that I don’t commit to allowing either Tristan or The Reporter the power to become our protagonist, and it’s a juggling act that took up a good portion of editing time. I desperately wanted Tristan to be the main character of *Argos*, as having the story told from the perspective of her and Mom was important to me, and I had

Directed the film from this angle. Now having edited through all the material, being able to judge what I have and don't have, what key scenes I would add to the film in order to beef it up into a feature length, long format film shows that this story would best be told through the vantage of the *outsider* within the film – that being The Reporter. This would add suspense as well as furthering the power of the unknown.

Working from a location-based creative process involved a large amount of intuitive decision-making. This metonymic process, figuring one thing out, finding another bit of information, and moving on to the next piece of information given lends itself to a schedule that in its early stages is highly difficult to preconceive. While collecting information about owners of various properties it became apparent that we would have to reach out to the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte in order to successfully accomplish our shoot. A meeting was made with Chief R Donald Maracle, in order to discuss a few locations located on their territory as well as other ideas about holding a casting session for locals to participate in our film. This first meeting was the icebreaker in our pre-production, as the warmth and generosity delivered and offered by the Bay of Quinte Mohawks was phenomenal. A few days later they had posted our public auditions on their Facebook page and in a matter of hours it had been shared over 60 times. During our first meeting with the Chief, we were also told many personal stories about his ancestors which included elements of shape shifting. Prior to this meeting I had been ignorant of the role that transformation, animal and human dualities play within the Mohawk and First Nations cultures. Through their stories, it was apparent that shape-shifting was something taken on by an individual, usually out of sight of anyone else, and utilized to spy and watch over others. The way that we wanted to integrate transformation into our film was for it to be utilized as a defense mechanism by a mother who felt the father of her child was not living up to his role *as a*

*father*. In retaliation, she would transform him into a dog – the most loyal companion known to man. Though this idea is somewhat spoofy, we wanted to go about it with the best intentions that didn't establish a direct line of narrative appropriation. As one could presume, many metaphysical aspects within the genre of magic realism were inherently inspired by First Nations myths, stories, and art. One would be guilty to say that no appropriative aspects exist within any form of human-to-animal and animal-to-human narratives, but it is up to the contemporary storyteller to be aware of the insight gained and passed down through their art and history. What the contemporary storyteller is guilty of is using these ancient beliefs, stories, and narratives purely as forms of entertainment. What our use of *transformation* brings to *Argos* is a supernatural sense of leadership towards our female leads, giving them a higher sense of power and dignity. The collaborative aspect during our shoot with the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte was put towards locking down amazing privately owned locations and giving the opportunity for first-time actors to experience an independent film shoot. We were gracious for receiving such aid in all aspects that we voiced towards the Bay of Quinte community, and are excited to share the final product with them, hopefully going there to personally screen at their community centre. Though Italian Neo-Realism pushed the studio aside and moved the camera onto the streets, I am not necessarily interested in telling the documentarian stories that exist within places. I want to allow for the seeds of such locations to plant their potential *untold* stories within my work, immortalizing a fictionalized version of these found locations through a patient and inventive lens – beginning the genesis for a story.

## RELATION OF ARGOS TO PREVIOUS WORK

Every work of film or video that I've produced has been an attempt at merging narrative and experimental genres. My first attempt at creating any form of cinema was *Dis-caract* (2012) which I had shot on 16mm in order to learn the true patience of lighting and directing talent within a limited timeframe (literally the takes allowed per scene were reduced to two at most, due to shooting on film which had to be processed prior to editing). This film was an attempt at expressing the inner dreamscapes and processes of an artist, representing the bizarre world that existed within the main characters mind in order to exhibit how they rationalized their work, the world, and art. This film ended up looking like a project compiled of various filmed performance-art pieces, where we watch the characters enact a strange ritualistic process that may or may not add narrative structure to the whole. My second attempt at establishing a more comprehensible idea came about in the form of *Two Cares Due None* (2016) which was a feature length project shot in Iceland, Italy and Toronto. This multi-location shoot came about when a friend and I received residency grants to go to Iceland, and I saw the opportunity as a moment to begin writing something complicated and strange. This film, which rounds out to 99 minutes, was an attempt to create a traditional narrative project without any previous knowledge or training in narrative structure. Though many unique ideas are buried within the film, and the entire project has a homogenous aesthetic and tempo, it doesn't fully resolve itself to being a comprehensible *narrative*! This enabled my main attempt and reason for studying at York: to focus my writing and directing towards a short-form project and build a layered journey that told a simplified story. Though I don't know if *Argos* seems like a simple story, it is definitely a step towards creating work that has a relatable narrative structure.

Even when producing music videos, I am sensitive to whether the project is entirely non-narrative, utilizing shapes, colour, and fragments to establish a flow or tempo, or whether there is an underlying narrative concept or written script and/or dialogue that goes into the production process before or after it's been shot. For all of my previous work that I consider narrative, I have written comprehensive scripts that end up being very close examples of what the final edited project becomes. My experimental work in the narrative vein is preconceived, and does not come about through experimentation during the shoot. However, all of my projects haven't been focused on implementing a specific story or lesson within the narrative arch. Even more so, I have never attempted to put together and follow through with a traditional three-act story structure in a film and/or concentrated on the script's goal as much as I have in this short film. Even though *Argos* doesn't follow a traditional three-act structure, it does separate itself from my previous work as my closest attempt to date at creating what I deem to be a more conventional genre narrative, something with an overarching message that gets told through fictional characters and scenes. Why *Argos* doesn't hold up entirely as a perfect short film is that I attempted to bring too many elements and characters into play within the compressed timeline. A short film needs to be streamlined in the script and pre-production stages, with its main narrative goal being clear and focused. This was the main lesson I learned attempting to produce this Thesis project; to pair down and mold a story into the slimmest form possible. That being said, I was able to add and insert various key lines of dialogue off camera through two separate ADR sessions, recorded both in Vancouver with our lead actor Britt Irvin who played Mom, and in Toronto with the Youth and The Reporter. These added lines were used both as off camera dialogues as well as a voice over in the case of The Reporter (who is transformed into a dog at the end of film and is able to reflect on his current life right before the ending credits).



## CONCLUSION

Like my previous work, *Argos* continues to explore high-concept story-telling and surreal or supernatural ideas through a version of magic-realism that's inspired by contemporary art references, literature, poetry and various movements of cinema. I do see a thread in my work that integrates task-based processes that attempt to be normalized within the fictional world. A way that allows me to ground myself when I am writing is searching through GoogleMaps and/or locations I've passed while biking or driving, and writing a narrative that exists within that specific location. This allows for me to build a fantasy out of something concrete and pre-existing, a tactic that I feel comfortable continuing into future projects. A film-scene reference that I often look at and one which I discussed with my Media class while TAing at York this year, is the diner scene from David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001). In this scene one character attempts to describe a serious dream which turned into a nightmare, a dream that was about the exact conversation the two characters are presently having. The one man narrates what the other person does, while that character completes that action. It begins to seem surreal, as he narrates the course of the conversation and the retelling of the dream layers atop of the scene that exists presently, it ends with the man walking outside and looking for something in the parking lot – an act which he had accomplished that morning in his nightmare. We end up seeing a flash of a witch-looking demon that snarls at him as he buckles down in tears. This overlapping of dreamscape/nightmare world and reality is so phenomenally blocked, acted, and written that I can't help looking to it as a key influence and lesson on filmmaking.

Looking at filmmaker Yorgos Lanthimos, who wrote and directed *Dogtooth* (2009) and *The Lobster* (2015), was a great inspiration to me when attempting to naturalize high-

concept elements within the story. Usually without showing or creating any bizarre or out of the ordinary visual effects, Lanthimos gains trust from his viewers so that they believe – without seeing – the otherworldly aspects of his narratives. For *Argos*, I wished to heighten the level of fear and surrealism by showing the transformation sequence to the audience, and even before the script was finished, I knew that a big challenge was going to be how we established a system for the transformation process that would be repeatedly used. My previous experience editing high-paced music videos translated into the creation of the transformation sequence by layering a scene shot with a still-camera strobe light atop the main scene shot inside the Kennel. Adding high-tempo flashes allowed for a unique and simplistic way of establishing that Mr. Levi was indeed transforming from a man into a dog. In the end, I do feel that *Argos* is the most straightforward narrative that I've written and directed, although I believe it sets up a possible prototype of what a feature length version could be like, suggesting how all the peripheral characters and relationships could be developed, building the specific tones and moods when given more screen time and space to grow. Furthermore, I honestly feel that if the lead female roles were given more time to develop their specific mother/daughter bond, they would make a larger impact on the film. Lastly, within a feature length format, the stakes within *Argos* would be able to be heightened, with all possible tensions between the fathers who are going to be transformed into dogs expanded to a point that would engage a grander sense of suspense, as well as exploring what happens when the father-transformed-dog returns to his family as a pet.

At the outset, it may seem that relying on the site or location of a place to inspire a story concept is an unproductive route. However, events exist in locations, and the identity of a space can inform the content based upon it. Instead of arriving at a location with a pre-meditated

and pre-conceived story, where the space can be treated like it's in the way of ones concept, and everything within and around it must be altered, moved or shifted to build the necessary narrative – coming from a conscientious place of respect towards ones surroundings can reveal the hidden secrets and intricately subtle narratives within a place.

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